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## Racists by Kunal Basu

By James Urquhart

### *The skull beneath the skin colour*

Racists imagines a quarrel between two scientists determined to prove the pre-eminence of their pet theories about the natural superiority of one race to another. Professor Samuel Bates's unwavering belief that white Europeans have a natural superiority over black Africans is based upon his precise measurement of the relative size and significant dimensions of skulls that he has collected from races across the globe. Bates correlates skull to brain size and assumes therefore that the larger European brain cavity affords a greater capacity than the smaller African one to acquire the defining civilised qualities, such as reason, mercy or restraint. Nicholas Quartley, his loyal assistant, reveres Bates's thesis as "the bible of the new science of craniology" - with no sense of irony, since Darwin has yet to assault the natural sciences.

Bates has a French rival. As a young doctor, Belavoix witnessed the aftermath of inter-tribal slaughter in Nubia, which traumatic grain became the pearl of his thesis: the negro is not inferior to the European, but entirely unrelated. The only common bond of differing races is the shared "germ" of racial hatred.


The two establish a cruel experiment to test their ideas. Norah, a mute nurse, is settled on a barren, uninhabited island with two infants, a white girl and a black boy. Norah is under strict instructions simply to service the children's animal needs until they reach puberty, and offer no love, example or instruction. She will receive monthly supplies of food and medicine from a passing ship, and the two scientists will visit for a few weeks twice a year to observe (and, in Bates's case, measure) the children. Bates smugly expects the white girl to develop a natural superiority as the years progress; Belavoix anticipates simply that one will eventually kill the other.

Neither character is given much assistance by the author. Bates is an ogre: imperious, self-centred, arrogant, humourless and cruel, he has no depth of personality or foible to rescue him from his tediously smug argument. Belavoix seems to be cast mostly as a jester, playing up his theatrical maladies and feebly flirting with Norah. Neither has overweening flaws that might prove psychologically intriguing, and Basu allows their unscientific bickering to drone on through too much of Racists without ameliorating incident. Quartley tries to help half way through the novel by acquiring ex nihilo a passion for Norah who, simultaneously but independently, discovers a passion for Quartley. Is Norah all she appears to be? Oho! - but at least this abrupt and convenient reciprocation adds a touch of warmth and accelerates the plot towards a mildly affecting dénouement.

Racists is not bulging with interesting or dynamic characters, and the plot's static argument struggles to excite. Basu's début novel, The Opium Clerk, promised much for the author's slightly ponderous prose style. Racists falls somewhere between an earthbound novel of ideas and an exotic adventure without managing to deliver very much of substance.

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